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ABSTRACT

The concept of adolescence as a period during which certain kinds of behavior are to be expected has become institionalized in the American education system; acceptance of this "rite of passage" creates barriers for adolescent female refugees from the Hmong and Mien hilltribes of Laos, whose cultures do not include the concept of adolescence. Adolescence is a middle-class American concept describing young people who are no longer children but who do not work. Attending school is the adolescent's primary social task, and American educators have constructed barriers against early parenthood, early marriage, and dropping out. However, Hmong and Mien tribal cultures require females to marry as soon as possible, raise children, and work in the home. Case studies of two refugee adolescent women, one Hmong and one Mien, illustrate the following cultural differences and their implications: (1) schooling for females, central to American adolescence, does not exist in either culture, promoting fade out behavior among refugee females torn between school and family obligations; (2) group identity and kinship structures eliminate any sense of independence or "self," strong characteristics of American adolescents; (3) survival is a cultural priority reflected in early marriage and large families, both regarded as socially deviant in American adolescents; (4) females have no right to challenge male authority or to develop self-esteem, one of the primary tasks of American adolescents. Day care, flexible scheduling, and innovative programs would help these young wives and mothers complete a secondary education. A list of eight references is appended. (FMW)

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BARRIERS FOR TEENAGE REFUGEE WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

A COMPARISON OF HMONG AND MIEN HILLTRIBE WOMEN

By

Wendy D. Walker

A paper presented to the AERA
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I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, as a concept, has been a powerful shaper of expectations in American schools for many decades. A middle - class concept derived to describe young people who were no longer children but no longer worked. Adolescence has become institutionalized in our schools. Educators and parents have come to expect certain kinds of behavior during the teenage years related to the struggle for independence. This behavior, unique to the teenage stage of life, is commonly regarded as the rites of passage to adulthood. It is this independent behavior, too, that often leads to social deviancy and problems in school. To prevent behavior like this from occurring, educators have constructed barriers to teen pregnancy, early marriage and drop-outs.

But now in the United States there are cultural groups for whom adolescence is not an issue. There is no such thing as adolescence for Hmong and Mien refugee girls from Laos now living in the United States. For these girls their traditional lifestyle is still dominant. That lifestyle entails babies, as many as possible for the Hmong and that means beginning as young as possible. For them the biggest challenge is not teen parenting but attending school. The problems they have in overcoming those barriers constructed against social deviancy so that they can attend school show how changing demographics means changing our notions of social deviancy and the barriers against

them. Educators must become aware of the cultures in their classrooms, particularly as they affect gender roles.

II. METHODOLOGY

In 1981 I had just completed graduate school in England and was living in Seattle, Washington with two other single women. One day a friend, Mary Catlin, brought a van full women to our house for a party. They wore traditional black turbans or scarves around their heads and long skirts. They all sat on the floor and whispered about everything they saw. I later learned that they were Hmong and Mien hilltribe women who were refugees from Laos. None of them had ever been to school in any country. Their languages, both Hmong and Mien, were oral, not literate. Most of these women were my age, or younger.

In 1983 I went to live in Thailand where I worked for three years in the refugee camps. One of my jobs was teaching pre-literate Hmong and Mien women, like those I had met in Seattle, how to work in the United States. I taught them how to put together electrical circuit breakers, use sewing machines, wait on tables, and other types of manual labor. They learned these tasks with a great deal of curiosity and humor. But there was a great difference between how we learned. They learned by watching and doing. I learned by reading books. While I had been attending school for twenty-odd years and was trying to put my education to work, they had gone from children to adults and raised children of their own. They had never gone through a

period like adolescence. They had never searched for their own identity. Their's was a group identity. It still is.

After returning from Thailand, I went to Harvard University where I earned a doctorate in education. The subject of my dissertation was the challenge that Hmong and Mien students presented to U.S. public schools. As I conducted my research I became increasingly interested in the issue of adolescence and young Hmong and Mien women. This then, is the product of my experiential process of learning over the past ten years. I have included two ethnographic case studies. One I have known since I worked in the refugee camps in Thailand. The other I have known since moving to Berkeley, California four years ago. In both cases I knew and worked with the husbands first. This provided unusual insights into the gender roles in both cultures.

III. THE CONCEPT OF ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence, as we know it, is an American middle-class creation. It is a norm of western industrial cultural behavior. Adolescence is essentially linked with education and freedom from adult responsibilities. It is a period of growing independence and the search for one's identity. Theoretically, adolescence is the period in life when cultures prepare youngsters for adult roles in life. Adolescence is when an emerging adult learns the biological taboos and social prescriptions of her culture. Adolescence begins with the onset of puberty, but should not be confused with pubescence.

Historically, adolescence is a middle class phenomenon that emerged as a result of industrialization in the 19th and 20th centuries (Modell and Goodman, 1990) that freed youngsters from ties to their family farms. Young people who were not middle class "were often perceived as having no adolescence" (Modell and Goodman, 1990). Yet when poor youngsters exhibited such behavior as pregnancy, school drop-outs and early marriage, it was regarded as deviant adolescent behavior. Although Hmong and Mien youngsters exhibit little of what is now considered social deviancy today - drug use and gang violence - they are still treated as social deviants because of early pregnancy and early marriage. Essentially, they are forced to drop-out of school because schools cannot accommodate their roles as mothers and adults.

Modell and Goodman (1990) associated adolescence with the development of the field of psychology and theories of evolution. Margaret Mead first studied teen-age girls in Samoa. "Coming of Age in Samoa," but she did so as a classical anthropologist by applying pre-existing theories to "primitive" peoples.

Adolescence became ensconced as a concept in American culture since World War II with the growth of suburbs in the 1950s as bedroom communities where the family is removed from the working world. The sanctity of the teenage years as a distinct period in life has become almost a cult. We support it not only in the structure of our schools, but in our legal system that treats teenagers differently than adults. Adolescence has been

commercialized. Adolescents are regarded as a whole class of consumers. Advertising exploits the importance of peer pressure and acceptance amongst teens. Teenagers wear their own type of clothing, including footwear, listen to distinct music and eat food that has been marketed just for them. Working on the family farm is not teen work. Working after-school for Burger King is.

Beyond consumption of new fads, the principal duty of American adolescents is to attend school and get an education. Elliott and Feldman (1990) argue that extending education to college and often graduate school also extends adolescence, "the perceived importance of formal education and the required duration for that process have lengthened the period of adolescence, and its cost has extended the time during which many adolescents remain financially dependent on their families." Education is expected to prepare young people to make choices, to be good citizens and to contribute the prosperity of the nation. The idea that school prepares youngsters for work is outdated.

Carol Gilligan has pioneered the psychology of American adolescent females today. Her work (1982, 1990) on middle class and upper income girls, most of whom are white, typifies the concepts that educators use to evaluate the psychological and social needs of female teenage students. Her research includes studies of morality, self perceptions and relationships from an individual perspective. Gilligan's work is revealing and supportive for women who grew up with middle class norms of behavior, attended school in American cities and suburbs, and

questioned ourselves within the accepted norms of behavior in American middle schools and high schools. The irrelevance of Gilligan's work for Hmong and Mien girls in the United States shows us how very far we still have to go as educators to understand the cultures of all girls in our classrooms and the barriers to their education.

IV. HMONG AND MIEN TEENAGE GIRLS

School is central to Gilligan's theory of the unique psychology of adolescent girls. Schools is the state of tension for Hmong and Mien girls who are torn between being Hmong or Mien and being American adolescents. Traditionally, the Hmong and Mien did not have schools, nor did they have family planning alternatives. Traditionally, the way both of these cultures resolved the biological needs of adolescent females was to marry them to older men as soon as they are physically and sexually mature.

"Self" is not a concept in either the Hmong or Mien cultures. These are tribal people. The reason they have survived for thousands of years as a distinct people and a minority in China, Thailand, and Laos, is because of their group identity. Group identity and tightly knit kinship structures effectively eliminates any sense of independence or the need for it.

The Hmong and Mien are both hilltribes from Laos. Although their languages are mutually unintelligible and they are

physically distinct, they have many characteristics in common. Both come from an oral tradition. Both fought for the United States when the Southeast Asian war extended into Laos, an ostensibly neutral country. The Hmong and Mien lost more than half of their total population due to combat, disease caused by displacement and bombing by the United States. Both came to the United States as refugees after we lost the war.

Survival, as a cultural priority, is so strong that the behavior of the Hmong and Mien still reflects a world that no longer exists. The average Hmong woman in this country has nine children (Rumbaut and Weeks, 1986). This incredibly high birthrate has not altered, despite the number of years many have lived in the United States. The birthrates of other refugee groups, including the Mien, Cambodians, Vietnamese and ethnic Lao, have responded to the typical downward pressures on immigrant fertility brought about by education and living in the United States.

Girls have no right to challenge the male authority structure. The only power women have is over their children, their daughter-in-laws who live with them, and their husband's minor wives. Polygamy is acceptable in both cultures. There is room for research on the "learned helplessness" of Hmong women in particular, but self-esteem is not a factor in their lives. Self-esteem does not decrease during adolescence, it never existed.

The following two case studies demonstrate the barriers

faced by Hmong and Mien teenage girls in American public schools. They also demonstrate how two cultures have responded differently to these barriers.

V. CASE STORY OF A HMONG ADOLESCENT WOMAN

Si Chi's marriage to Kue Ger was arranged by her father and Kue Ger's older brother. Si Chi had little say in the negotiation of her marriage. She was thirteen years old. The basis of the marriage negotiations was that Kue Ger wanted to come to the United States and her family had been accepted for resettlement. Since their marriage, Kue Ger and Si Chi have developed a relationship of love, but the love was not apparent until they left her father's home. It was unHmong for Kue Ger to live in the home of his wife and to have her father the head of his family.

At the age of fifteen, Si Chi, was regarded as an adult by fellow Hmong. She was proud to be married. Many of her Hmong friends envied her. Si Chi said that before she was married, school and home responsibilities were of equal importance. After she was married but before she had a baby, education was her top priority. But after having a baby, the baby became all-important. Now, at the age of seventeen, she is expected to keep her family's apartment clean, entertain her husband's friends, prepare traditional Hmong meals, do the laundry, care for three daughters and try to have a son as soon as possible.

Si Chi, her husband and their baby shared a two-bedroom

apartment with her husband's cousin, his wife, their two teenage boys, two toddler boys and a baby girl. They shared their bedroom with one of the teenage boys. Although these conditions are not crowded compared to those of many recently arrived refugee families whose one-bedroom apartment may be shared by as many as twenty-one relatives, Kue Ger thought they were too crowded for Americans. He and his wife and first child moved into a one-room apartment a few blocks away.

Had Si Chi grown up in Laos, she probably would not have attended school for more than a few years. Instead, she is one of a few Hmong girls who completed all six grades in the primary school at Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand. Si Chi exemplifies the tension that education has introduced into the traditional role of Hmong women. Si Chi is typically Hmong but she is also an American teenager. While she was pregnant and since giving birth the first time, she was frustrated by her confinement to the home. She anxiously waited for her friends to come home from school so she could talk to them on the phone and find out what happened that day. Si Chi was also jealous of her husband's two boy cousins who are thirteen and fifteen years old and who have been able to continue studying in the seventh grade. Si Chi thinks she is smarter than either of them, but their English and academic skills continue to grow while hers stagnate. Initially Si Chi was anxious to return to school as soon as her first baby was born, but her husband told her he was "too busy" with his own education to bring her. Since then she has wavered

back and forth about school. In two years she has had three children.

The school systems in San Diego and Fresno have not handled Si Chi well. Her family was originally resettled in St. Paul, where, at age fourteen, she was placed in the eighth grade. She liked school, had many Hmong girlfriends and did well in her ESL classes. But two months into the school year, her family decided to move to San Diego. In early November, the San Diego school district placed her in the ninth grade because her Immigration and Naturalization Services card said she was fifteen years old, even though she was fourteen by American years. San Diego schools told her she could not enroll until February. Si Chi never enrolled in San Diego because she and Kue Ger moved to Fresno to join his relatives there in December. Si Chi was told she could go to adult school, but when she insisted on enrolling in regular school, they again placed her in the ninth grade. Although her placement test showed that she could go into mainstream classes, she was encouraged to remain in the newcomer's program at the school for adult education because she was pregnant. The director of the Teen Parenting Resource Center in Fresno told me that the schools do not like to have pregnant girls in junior high school because "they think it is catchy.".

In April, after two months of the eighth grade and three months of the ninth grade, Si Chi stopped going to school because her husband was afraid she would hurt herself and the baby on the crowded school bus. No one told her she could go on home-study.

Her baby was born in August. For five months she did little but watch television and help the wife of her husband's cousin with her little children. After the birth, the director of the newcomer program again suggested that Si Chi go to the adult school. No one told Si Chi or her husband that five of the high schools in Fresno have nursery facilities.

Si Chi's husband talked to the woman in charge of the teen parenting program at Roosevelt High School in September. She said he should take Si Chi to register in October. In October her husband brought Si Chi to meet the principal at Roosevelt High School. The principal said Si Chi could start in the winter term. Again, no one provided Si with a home-study program. Si Chi wanted to enroll in November. The secretary at Roosevelt High School said she could not enroll until the next quarter. The guidance counselor assigned to students in the ninth grade whose last name began with L had never heard of her. The guidance counselor said, "I don't have a girl of that name at this school." She then went on to explain that "it's very difficult. We don't have enough room" for new mothers. There were fifty to sixty girls in the teen mother program already. They are placed on a first come, first serve basis.

Eventually Si Chi's husband went to see another guidance counselor. He brought a letter from the director of the Newcomer Program. Si Chi was allowed to enroll in December in the ninth grade at Roosevelt High School. She left her daughter with her sister-in-law. Si Chi lasted two weeks. When her daughter came

down with chicken pox, Si Chi stopped going to school. Again, no one contacted her or told her that she was eligible for home study. In her new apartment there was no tv or radio, only a tape deck. During the day, Si Chi read her husband's school books and took care of the baby. After two months of sitting home, she wanted to try going to school again, but her husband decided they would move to a small town in northern California to join his brother. Si Chi's husband was told that she would have to pay for home study there.

After more than two years, Si Chi has never returned to school. Her days are occupied with her three young daughters ages two, one, and two months. She does not drive. She does not work. Her communication with the outside world is limited to the television, guests who come into her home, shopping expeditions and visits with her sister-in-laws. She is seventeen years old.

Si Chi's role models are women who are married and producing families. She does not know any educated Hmong women who could serve as alternative role models. Si Chi cannot turn to her mother for guidance or even to her older sisters, or to the wife of her husband's cousin with whom they used to live. In trying to pursue her education, Si Chi is doing what none of them have done. Without the perspective or experience of an older person to draw upon, Si Chi sees no contradiction between wanting more children immediately and wanting more education. Si Chi is excited about having many more babies, as soon as possible. She does not want to use any method of birth control even though she

knows about them, but she wants to go to high school, too. Family planning has never been a priority of the Hmong. The desire for education may cause Si Chi and others like her to recognize how difficult it is to be a mother and to be a junior high or high school student.

VI. CASE STUDY OF A MIEN ADOLESCENT WOMAN

Tracy (pseudonym) is an 18 year old Mien young woman. Tracy appears to be a "typical" successful Asian-American student. She attends the University of California at Berkeley. She wears round, tortoise-shell glasses that mark her as an intellectual. Her straight long black hair parted in the middle and layered style of dress bespeaks the influence of Annie Hall - large blouses, t-shirts, vests and pants. She is reluctant to have attention focused on her, and appears to fit the classic western image of a beautiful, quiet Asian female.

Tracy's family was the one of the first Mien refugee family resettled in the United States in the after-math of the Southeast Asian war. Although Tracy has been in the United States most of her life, she had to struggle to attend college. Language was not a problem. She speaks English better than Mien. The tensions between her home culture and the school culture were the primary problem. Her family expected her to be a typical Mien woman, to marry young, to have many babies and to take care of her family or in-laws.

Tracy rebelled against these expectations. She did not want

to be a typical Mien woman. She was smart and she was American. But she was still not an adolescent. Before going to school and after returning home each day, Tracy had adult responsibilities - care for her younger brothers and sisters, traditional cooking, washing, cleaning and conducting business for her parents with the landlord, the welfare office, the telephone company, gardening and food shopping.

Despite not having an adolescence, Tracy was able to go to college because she married a man who allowed her to. Her husband, also Mien, is a well-educated leader in the Mien community. He did not demand that Tracy have children immediately, even though in the Mien culture, Tracy is already "too old" to be without children. Tracy also benefitted because her parents-in-law were far-sighted and her husband's sisters expected to go to college. Instead of treating Tracy like a lesser human being, her mother-in-law worked so that Tracy, her husband and her sisters-in-law could study. Unlike most Mien households, Tracy's mother-in-law did most of the cooking, cleaning and shopping so that Tracy would be able to attend college and have time to study.

Tracy was able to attend college because like other Mien women, she has adapted more quickly to American culture than Hmong women. Mien women work, drive automobiles and practice family planning. Typical Hmong women do none of these.

Why is it that Mien women have acculturated more quickly than Hmong women? The answer seems to lie in the strict

patrilineal authority system that still dominates most Hmong. The Mien still respect men more than women, but there is no single authority figure in the Mien culture as there is in the Hmong culture. The Mien have no tight hierarchical system that places the education of women at the bottom of their cultural priorities as the Hmong do.

VII. CONCLUSION - "A PROBLEM OF PERCEPTION"

In spite of the ostensible similarities between the Hmong and Mien cultures, the two cultures are really very different in how they regard women. Yet, in neither culture is there room for the adolescent stage in life. Survival is the top cultural priority for both peoples. In order to survive, these cultures require the full participation of their young people in the daily operations of the household. If a young person cannot do his or her work, as in the case of Tracy, another person must consciously take over that work. When young people are no longer needed in the household, these cultures will be very different than they are now. Until then, schools must accommodate young people who are not adolescents, particularly young women who have children, husbands and family responsibilities.

The Hmong and Mien cultures create special problems for girls. Girls are torn between the traditional expectations of their culture and their American teenager identity at school. As the case example of Si Chi shows, Hmong girls who are young mothers want to study, they want to attend school, but they are

unable to unless someone cares for their babies when they are sick and well.

Hmong and Mien girls who marry early need their husband's support to continue their education. If they have children or become pregnant, they need flexible school schedules and to be informed about home study options and teen parenting programs. They need day care facilities if their mother-in-law or sister-in-law cannot take care of their children on a regular basis.

The case story of Si Chi suggests that three things may occur when a Hmong girl who is married and/or pregnant from age thirteen on moves into a new district. She may be placed in the ninth grade, even though she was formerly in the seventh or eighth grade. She may be encouraged to remain in the newcomer program even though she tests out and is eligible for the mainstream. Or she may be encouraged to go to adult school. Finding that she is misplaced, the girl may fade out or show up for class only occasionally. She does not appear on the records as a drop-out.

It is in the interest of both refugee students and the schools not to regard a student like Si Chi as a drop-out. One reason is that refugee students in certain states are eligible for refugee welfare as long as they are enrolled in school. Another is that some of the funding that schools receive for bilingual education is based on the number of bilingual students. While some schools might be motivated to enroll more bilingual students in order to obtain more funding, schools may be

reluctant to aggressively ensure that young mothers and pregnant teens are actually attending school because the schools do not have the additional funding necessary to provide for the special needs of young mothers and pregnant teenage girls.

The norms of behavior of Hmong and Mien refugees belong to a world that is no longer theirs. Although flexibility has long been a trait of both cultures, it does not necessarily apply to women. In the United States, education of girls poses the greatest challenge to accepted norms of behavior.

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